

TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS IN THE CONTEXT OF INDONESIAN EDUCATION REFORM

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Abstract

Globalization as a social process is inevitable and thus requires nations to join global community of the world. The liberalized economics, modernized culture, and democratized politics as the effects of globalization demand competition and interdependence among nations. Only will human resources with good quality support a country to enhance its competitive power. To contribute to the development of the human resources, some schools in Indonesia have taken into action the strategic decision, that is teaching English to young learners since their early age. English is chosen as the first foreign language to teach because of its status as a global language. This paper focuses on the discussion of the teaching of English to young learners to support the development of human resources in Indonesia.

Key-words: *teaching English, young learners, human resources, globalization*

Introduction

Since the last decade of the second millennium the world has been marked with a very influential phenomenon called *globalization*. Waters (1995), cited in Gunarwan (2000: 312), defines globalization as a process whereby nations are becoming more and more so interconnected in terms of economy, culture, and by implication, politics that country boundaries become “fuzzy”. In Waters’ (1995: 3) words, globalization is “(a) social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding.” This is made possible owing to the rapid progress in advanced technology, particularly information, transportation and communication technologies. When, and if, the process succeeds, what we have is a fully globalized world, in which there is only “one community and one culture which may be harmoniously or disharmoniously integrated” (ibid). In such a context, English plays a strategic role as an international means of communication.

Like it or not, every country, including Indonesia, has to respond the globalization. One of the strategic ways Indonesia has to do to

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respond the globalization is providing English communication skills to Indonesian as the human resources since their early age. This article attempts to discuss the contribution of the teaching of English to young learners to the development of Indonesian human resources.

Globalization and Its Implications

The definition of globalization covers three areas: economy, politics and culture. In the arena of economics, globalization alludes to trade liberalization; in the arena of culture, it implies modernization; and, in the arena of politics, it implies democratization (Gunarwan, 2000: 313). The fact that globalization requires nations to join a global community economically, culturally, and politically so that it makes the world boundaries blur is unavoidable. That is why globalization should be welcome and headed; it cannot be blocked or protected in order not to intrude the life of a nation.

Such a globalized community is characterized by the interdependence and, more importantly, the competition among its members that the status of a member nation in that community, whether it is central or peripheral, depends, to large extent, on its competitive advantages rather than on its comparative advantages (Gunarwan, 2000: 313). In addition to this characteristic, the twenty-first century society is also identified with other characteristics. Mulkeen and Tetenbaum (1987, cited in by Lange, 1990 and quoted by Madya, 2003: 6) mention six characteristics of today's technological society: (1) The twenty-first century is knowledge-based; (2) The twenty-first century witnesses an increased information flow; (3) The twenty-first century witnesses rapid change and impermanence; (4) The twenty-first century witnesses an increase in decentralization of organization, institution, and system; (5) The twenty-first century is people-oriented; and (6) The twenty-first century witnesses major demographic shift. The implications of these characteristics, according to Lange (1990, cited in Madya, 2003: 7), are concerned with recruitment of prospective teachers, the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered, lifelong learning, autonomous learner, autonomous teachers, and the needs for minority students.

The characteristics above make the globalized society sound powerful. In fact, however, beyond the characteristics lies tensions the people have to face. Avoiding these tensions will just put them in the position of true witnesses, not the agents, of change. The following are the seven tensions to be overcome by all the people in the 21st century (Madya, 2003: 7): (1) the tension between global and the local; (2) the tension between the universal and the individual; (3) the tension between the tradition and modernity; (4) the tension between the extraordinary expansion of knowledge and human beings' capacity to assimilate it; (6) the tension between the spiritual and the material; and (7) the tension between, on the other hand, the need for competition, and on the other hand, the concern for equality of opportunity.

Skills in resolving conflicts (see Lewellyn, 1997; Pruet and Cooley, 1997; Duhon-Sells, Sells and Mouton, 1997 cited in Madya, 2003: 7) seem to be new skill to be developed in every Indonesia citizen. Judging the phenomenal characteristics and the tensions as challenges rather than threat, it is worth considering the pillars for education in this century put forward by Delors (1997 cited in Madya, 2003: 7): learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be.

Is Indonesia, a developing country, ready to face these global macro challenges? Unfortunately, the answer is partly *no*. To be able to compete well with the other country, qualified human resources are the key. In fact, Indonesian human resources are still qualitatively low, though quantitatively exportable. Thus, Indonesia is less competitive due to the low quality of its human resources although according to the 2015 Human Development Report released by UNDP, Indonesia's Human Development Index (HDI) value for 2014 is 0.684, which put the country in the medium human development category—positioning it at 110 out of 188 countries and territories. It means that Indonesia has not belonged to the group of countries with high or even very high human development index yet.

In short, globalization leaves all Indonesian people with two kinds of challenges: macro and micro. At macro level, all Indonesians have to head the unavoidable intrusion of the other countries' economic, political, and cultural values and beliefs that may be partly or completely different from theirs. Alertness, not suspicion, in welcoming these differences is needed since not all of the values and beliefs are bad for Indonesian. In order to be able to keep surviving in the era of liberalized economics, modernized culture, and democratized politics, all Indonesians have to struggle to elevate themselves to have higher competitive power and inclusive and synergetic attitude and conduct. At micro level, Indonesian still have to struggle to resolve the domestic multidimensional crisis, including the lowness of the quality of human recourses. One of the solutions to cope with the multidimensional crisis is developing Indonesian human resources. Included in these solutions is teaching English to young learners (as the nation's next generation) to provide them with English communicative skills to enable them to go global.

Indonesian Education Reform

Historically speaking, the force for education reform that is now still going on is not only from the globalization pressure but also from the fall of the New Order Government in 1998, which demanded political reform. Political reform, in turn, triggers the demand of all-sector reform, including education reform. Thus, for Indonesian, 1998 is the milestone to start great reform before entering the third millennium.

Chosen to be one of the important solutions to global challenges, the education reform directed to improve the quality of human resources, the country's major capital for further development of other sectors, is

formally manifested by the government in the National Education System Act. The goal of the national education stated in Article 4 of the previous Act (1989), cited in “Kurikulum Pendidikan Dasar, Landasan, Program dan Pengembangan” (Depdikbud, 1993), is as follows:

National Education aims at sharpening the intellectual life of the nation and developing Indonesian people to become integrated human beings who believe in and are pious to God the Almighty and possess morality, knowledge and skill, physical and spiritual health, stable and independent personality, and social and national responsibility.

In the beginning of reformation era, this goal was revised into (Chapter II, Article 3 of the 2003 National Education System Act):

National education functions to develop the capability and shape the character and the prestigious civilization of the nation in attempt to sharpen the intellectual life of the nation, aims at developing learners’ potentials so as to become human beings who believe in and are pious to God the Almighty, possess exalted morality, and are healthy, knowledgeable, capable, creative, independent, and become democratic and responsible citizens.

The legal statement of the goal is strengthened with the six principles of executing education (Chapter III, Article 4) as follows:

1. Education is executed democratically, fairly, and non-discriminatively by revering human rights, values of religion, culture and nation’s plurality.
2. Education is executed as an integrated, inclusive and multi-meaningful system.
3. Education is executed as a lifelong process of cultivating and empowering learners.
4. Education is executed by giving learners exemplary conduct and developing their motivation and creativity during the learning process.
5. Education is executed by developing all the people’s habits of reading, writing and calculating.
6. Education is executed by involving all the components of society to take a part in executing and controlling the educational services.

Then, connected with the globalization, Chapter X, Article 36, Subsection (3), Point i of the Act states:

- (3) Curriculum is designed in accordance with education level in the context of the Republic of Indonesia by considering:
- i. the dynamics of global changes;

From the goal and the six principles of the execution of the education, it can be highlighted here that the Indonesian education reform is directed: (1) to enhance the democratization and indiscrimination in

education based on the values of religion, culture, plurality, (2) to establish an integrated system of education as a lifelong process of learning and empowering through positive exemplary conduct giving and motivation and creativity enhancement, (3) to develop the community's habit of reading, writing and calculating, and to increase the involvement of community in executing and controlling the educational services. This direction of the education reform is oriented to respond the dynamics of global changes.

All of these written policies are nothing but ideal national concepts; they are not that easy to be executed. However, that they become the legal basis and the good start for the national movement in educational sector is undeniable. More operationally, the running of the education policy is further manifested in the 2000-2004 National Development Program of the Department of National Education of Indonesian (Pusat Data dan Informasi Pendidikan, Balitbang-Depdiknas, 2003). It is stated that the policy of the development of education according to the 1999-2004 State Guidelines is: "To extend and equalize the opportunity of gaining education...", "To increase academic competence and professionalism...", "To renew the system of education ...", "To empower the formal and nonformal education institutions...", "To renew and enhance the national education system in accordance with the principles of decentralization, autonomy, science and management", "To increase the quality of education institutions...", "To improve the quality of human resources as early as possible ...", and "To increase the mastery, development, and use of science and technology...".

In short, all of the Government's documents have transparently covered the values implied in the era of globalization and the need to be developed. Thus, despite the pitfalls in articulating the education policies, Indonesia has shown seriousness in positively responding the challenges of globalized economics, politics and culture.

The Need for a Global Language

In addition to the education reform, there is another demand that is blown up by globalization, i.e. the global language. The fact that "the era of globalization requires that nations join a global community of nations" and that nations are getting to be more and more interdependent imply the need for a language for wider communication (LWC) that enables a member nation to function effectively in the discourse of the globalized community (Gunarwan, 2000: 313). This further implies that "a developing nation needs to master a language with which it can bolster up its human resources to a level enabling it to have a competitive edge among nations" (ibid).

What is actually a global language? According to Crystal (1997: 2-4), a language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that it is recognized in every country. He explains further that to achieve such a status, a language has to be taken up by other countries

around the world. They must decide to give a special place within their communities, even though they may have few (or no) mother-tongue speakers. There are two main ways in which this can be done. Firstly, language can be made the official language of a country, to be used as a medium of communication in such domains as government, the law courts, the media, and the educational system. To get on these societies, it is essential to master the official language as early in life as possible. Such a language is often described as a 'second language', because it is seen as a complement to a person's mother tongue, or 'first language'. The role of an official language is today best illustrated by English, which now has some kind of special status in over seventy countries, such as Ghana, Nigeria, India, Singapore and Vanuatu.

Secondly, a language can be made a priority in a country's foreign-language teaching, even though this language has no official status. It becomes the language which children are most likely to be taught when they arrive in school, and the one most available to adults who – for whatever reason – never learned it, or learned it badly, in their early educational years. English is now the language most widely taught as a foreign language – in over 100 countries, such as China, Russia, Germany, Spain, Egypt and Brazil – and in most of these countries it is emerging as the chief foreign language to be encountered in schools, often displacing another language in the process.

Because of the three-pronged development – of first language, official-language and foreign-language speakers – it is inevitable that global language will eventually come to be used by more people than any other language. English has already reached this stage; the worlds have given English a status as a global language. As a global language, English has also been chosen by the Indonesian government as the first foreign language – as one of the compulsory subjects – to be formally taught to lower secondary students (the Decree of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia No. 060/U/1993, Attachment I) and to upper secondary school students (the Decree of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia No. 061/U/1993, Attachment I) beginning at their first grade. And through the Decree of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (No. 0487/U/1992, Chapter IX, Article 18, point 3 and 4), as cited below, the Indonesian government legitimizes the introductory teaching of English to primary school students since their fourth grade.

- (3) Primary School can add some extra subjects relevant to its surroundings and institutional typicality by not subtracting the substance of the legitimized national curriculum and not deviating from the goals of national education.
- (4) Primary School can describe and add some extra teaching-learning materials and subjects in accordance with local needs.

According to Crystal (1997: 4), there is a great variation in the reasons for choosing a particular language as a favored foreign language:

they include historical tradition, political expediency, and the desire for commercial, cultural or technological contact. The reason for choosing English as the first taught foreign language can be read in the Attachment I of the two Decrees above. It is stated in the legal documents that English is a foreign language that is considered important to be taught with the aim for absorbing and developing science, technology, arts and culture, and enhancing international relationships.

The use of English as means for heading globalization is thus a part of education reform packet. Even, the status of English has been strengthened in the 2003 National Education System Act, Chapter VII, Article 33, Point (3): “Foreign language can be used as a medium of instruction in a particular unit of education to support the development of foreign language communicative competence of the learners”. This means that English is present in the classroom not only as a compulsory or an optional subject but also as a medium to present other lessons.

Teaching English to Young Learners

It is clear then that the need for the teaching English in Indonesia is to support the nation to respond the rapid changes of the globalized world, that is to empower all the Indonesians to have higher competitive power to survive in the globalization era. Besides, the implementation of the English teaching and learning should begin as earlier as possible. Phenomenally, the number of primary schools offering English as an optional subject tends to increase. In some established primary schools, English is introduced since the first grade. Even today, there are a lot of nursery schools, playgroups or kindergartens in big cities that offer introductory English to their young learners. This vivid phenomenon can be seen from these educational institutions’ intensive advertisement through media such as ballyhoos, banners, fliers, leaflets, and brochures disseminated to public by the new academic year— the time for these schools to recruit new students.

In one side, the phenomenon is positive, indicating the higher participation of the community in succeeding the education reform in the country. In the other side, this tendency may not be that positive if the implementation of the English teaching learning activities is not properly designed for young learners and are not presented by competent teachers who are particularly prepared to teach young learners. Teaching young children is different from teaching high school students and adults because elementary school students have different biological, cognitive, affective, personal and social characteristics from adults’; children like doing things, playing games, and singing songs (Suyanto, 1997: 168). Accordingly, children need particular treatment different from older learners.

The Golden Age to Start Learning a Foreign Language

When dealing with the English teaching and learning for young learners, two crucial questions appear: (1) who young learner is and (2) what his or her ideal age to readily receive the teaching and learning of English for the first time is. The definition of young learners or young children can be referred to the concept of early childhood education. Morrison (1988: 4) defines *early childhood education* (ECE) as “the years from conception to age eight”. This definition implies that prenatal education is included here. Unlike Morrison, Spodek, Saracho, and Davis (1991: 2) define it as “the education of children from birth to age eight”; “it includes programs for infants and toddlers, nursery school, child care, and preschool program, as well as kindergarten and primary grades”. *Infants*, a Latin word meaning *speechless*, are children from birth to the beginning of walking; *toddlers* are children from one year of age, or the beginning of walking, to age three; *preschoolers* are children from age three to the beginning of kindergarten or first grade (Morrison, 1988, *ibid*). For the discussion of the teaching of English to young learner in this article, the definition of young learner as children from birth to age eight is used.

From the birth to age eight, the age of two can be the starting point for young learners to receive language teaching and learning. Cited in Morrison (1988: 7-9), an influential developmental psychologist, Erikson (b. 1902), a student of Sigmund Freud, describes in his *theory of psychosocial development* that at *Stage 3* (Locomotor genital), children of age three to five (to beginning of school) can explore their language development when given appropriate environment. According to Gesell (1880-1961), the founder of *maturational approach* to early childhood, children of age two can produce their speech of 3-word sentence with discarded jargon, use the pronouns *I*, *me* and *you*, mention correctly a couple of picture vocabulary, verbalize immediate experiences, and refer to self by name (Morrison, 1988: 10-13). Then, according to Piaget (1896-1980), a trained biologist who has had a profound effect on the understanding of how children acquire and use knowledge, describes in his *Cognitive-Development Model* that at the *Preoperational Stage* (2 to 7 years), children are characterized with their onset of sophisticated language system, egocentric reasoning, and perception bound-thinking (cited in Morrison 1988: 18-21), or children develop language and other symbolic representations; intuitive thought is not systematic or sustained (cited in Spodek, Saracho, and Davis, 1991: 82-83).

Based on these theories, it can be answered that English as a foreign language can be taught to children earlier beginning from the age of two, between the end of toddling period and preschool time. The earlier the teaching of English, the better the results will be. There are some advantages supporting this idea. First, children acquire foreign languages better than adults because they are less threatened by the sound of a new language and because children are willing to depend on others for support

in learning (Curran, 1972, cited in Vilke, 1979: 16). Considering their lack of intellectual maturity, however, teachers of English should realize that children of this age are not faster learners of structures and vocabulary as adult learners are. This fact shows the difference between the pre- and post-puberty acquisition of English (Vilke, 1979: 17).

Second, since the basic idea of introducing a foreign language into school curricula at an early age is to motivate the learners to make use of the language, it is natural then that the more the learners are familiar with English, the more willing they will be to learn to communicate in English. Accordingly, the possibility of the success in learning English is higher. Third, an early start in learning will give children enough time to acquire the phonetic system on a limited number of structures and vocabulary. They are excellent imitators of foreign phonetic systems and they can overcome this difficulty with ease if they are provided with good models to imitate. When they grow to the age of biological, social, and psychological maturity, they will be able to proceed to subtler and more abstract uses of the language. At that time, they have already mastered the phonetic system, and this is an asset hardly ever achieved satisfactorily at a later age. Fourth, bilingual children can be superior in verbal and non-verbal behavior to their monolingual peers. This shows that early bilingualism might affect the very structure of the intellect. Intellectually a child's experience with two-language system seems to give him or her mental flexibility, superiority in concept formation and a more diversified set of mental abilities. Fifth, children who start to learn a foreign language early in life can better understand their native language as they become conscious of the existence of language as a phenomenon. Their cultural outlook is wider than that of monolingual children who often believe that their own culture, their language and their customs are the only ones that matter in the world. Finally, the introduction of a foreign language idiom into the child's world help him to develop tolerance towards people different from him or her and in the long run contributes toward international understanding (Vilke, 1979: 18-20).

Some Critical Ideas to Consider Wisely

Despite the advantages, the execution of the teaching and learning of English to young learners may run out of the track if some existing critical ideas against this notion are neglected. Harrison (1990:1), cited in Hayes (1997: 105), reminds all of the English language Teaching (ELT) practitioners at the primary level of the cultural and ideological messages that may be consciously or unconsciously conveyed in the practice. He argues, "that teaching 'the language' is not a value-free or transparent activity". Pennycook (1995: 39) has summarized some of the critical writing in this area (ibid):

Cooke (1988) has described English has a Trojan horse, arguing that it is a language of imperialism and of particular class interest. Both he and Judd (1983) draw attention to the moral and political

implications of English teaching around the globe in terms of the threat it poses to indigenous language and the role it plays as a gatekeeper to better jobs in many societies.

Referring back to the fact that English for young learners in Indonesia is optionally taught, what Pennycook argues strengthens the possibility that only some of Indonesian children receive the teaching. This reality may, in turn, result in elitism among the society. If it happens, English has discriminated the children. It has been, thus, against the spirit of the national education reform—education for all. This will further results in the disempowerment of the children, not the expected reverse. Hayes (1997:109) states, “Education and LT are, therefore, serving to disempower the children of the socially disadvantaged rather than working to empower and to enhance their life chances. That such a situation persists leads me to conclude that Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is far from being honored.”

Another critical idea is questioning the possible degradation or even the loss of national language and identity resulted from the teaching of English to young children. This in line with Crystal’s (1997: 114-5) statement that people of a country may feel so antagonistic or ambivalent about English that they reject the option to give English a privileged status, either as an official language or a foreign language with the arguments about all to do with identity, and with language as the most immediate and universal of that identity (Crystal, 1997: 114-5). Crystal (197: 116) further argues that conflict is the common consequence when either position is promoted intensively.

There are, however, ways of avoiding such conflict, of course, notably in the promotion of bilingual or multilingual policies, which enable people both to ‘have their cake and eat it’. Because bilingual policies are expensive to resource, in both time and money, and they require a climate of cooperation, the implementation of the teaching of English to young children can resolve this side effect by enhancing the commitment to educational success and the collaboration of all the existing education institutions, both state and private, formal and nonformal. Community involvement in education service giving is another manifestation of the spirit of education reform. With such a frame of work, Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia) as the country’s language as stated in the 2003 National Education System Act, Chapter VIII, Article 33, Point (1) and national identity can be kept away from its degradation or loss.

Also supporting the problem solving of the conflict is the status giving to English as a “Glocal” language, by which English serves two functions: the global and the local. A Glocal language is global and yet rooted in the local contexts of its users. It supports local users and their use for it to express local identities in several countries while serving to interconnect the global community (Pakir, 2000: 15).

The last critical idea that also needs to be paid attention to is questioning about the objectives of the teaching of English to young

learners. Because teaching English to young children is carried out optionally, the Ministry of National Education of Indonesia issues no particular syllabus for its implementation guide. Instead, the regional or provincial curriculum board is supposed to design it (Suyanto, 1997: 167). As a result, the objectives of the English teaching and learning are not of national decision like those of lower (see the 2004 English Syllabus for Junior High School, Depdiknas, 2003) and upper (see the 2004 English Syllabus for Senior High School, Depdiknas, 2003) secondary schools. Consequently, it aims at meeting the local needs of the community—English lessons in the primary school are intended to develop ability to understand simple oral and written expressions (Huda, 1999: 135). This is contradictory with the institutional objectives of primary education. Institutionally, primary education is directed to prepare learners to readily attend higher-level education, the lower secondary education. Both the primary school and lower secondary school belong to the scheme of primary education (9-year elementary education) as stated in the 2003 National Education System Act, Chapter VI, Article 17 as follows:

- (1) Primary education is an education level as the foundation for secondary education.
- (2) Primary education covers primary school (SD) and madrasah ibtidaiyah (MI) or any other form of the same level and lower secondary school (SMP) and madrasah tsanawiyah (MTs) or any other form of the same level.

Accordingly, the objectives of the English teaching to young learners of primary school should be generated from those of the lower secondary school, and the objectives of the English lessons of lower secondary school should be generated from those of the upper secondary school. And automatically, the objectives of the English lessons for preschool program should be generated from those of the elementary school. Thus, the objectives of learning should be successively and spirally formulated to prepare learners for the next education level, and of course, without neglecting the language skills expected to be mastered by learners of each level.

Conclusion

The policy to teach English to young learners optionally is an appropriate decision that strategically backs up the education reform directed to raise up the quality of human resources as the country's main capital to compete in the era of globalization. Some controversies and contradictions that follow the policy should be judged as a common consequence but should not be let to discourage the commitment to education reform success. Thus, they need to be resolved and perceived as the challenges, rather than threats, prior to the successful attainment of education goals. Collaboration between the government and all other nation components should be continuously developed to respond the

challenges. The higher the community's participation, the more effective the attempt to attain the education reform goals will be. Public participation in executing the education reform is in line with the principle and spirit of the development of education as stated in the 2003 National Education System Act.

To make the education reform more effective, the government should also keep on motivating both formal and nonformal education organizations to spread the teaching of English to other young learners who so far have not received it yet, so that English lessons do not disempower and discriminate children, and create elitism among the children. More strategically, the government needs to elevate the optional status of the English lessons at primary school into compulsory one. If possible, the learners' beginning age to receive English lessons is made earlier, that is at the age of seven or the beginning of grade one. Then, to support the community's initiative to introduce English to the very young children during the preschool time, the National Education Department is supposed to supply them with theoretical perspectives of the English teaching and learning as a foreign language, teaching-learning media and materials, and some refresher courses for the instructors to update their teaching performance.

Finally, the teaching and learning of English in the global context should place English not only as a subject that is taught and learned to develop learners' English communicative competence but also as a medium of expressing national identity and nation's cultural values and as a means of understanding the other nation's cultural values and beliefs. Thus, both globally and locally, English is positioned as a means of message transaction and a medium of understanding values and beliefs. Teachers' alertness in selecting teaching-learning materials containing the likely values and beliefs of culture, politics and religions is badly needed to take away the unexpected appearance of the value and belief conflicts from the learners. All in all, to be in line with the macro design of the education reform, all of the policies issued by both national and regional or provincial department of education should be placed in the setting of integrated education system. This is to avoid the appearance of contra production among the educational policies.

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